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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: REGIME VIOLENTLY DISRUPTS OPPOSITION RALLY

Classified By: DCM Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Riot police violently broke up a peaceful March 25 rally/march held in Minsk to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic. Charge, A/DCM, and a few EU colleagues observed the start of the march, which gathered over 1000 participants in spite of suffocating police presence and heavy snow. Human rights activist Galina Sivchik told A/DCM that the police had beaten demonstrators and that roughly one hundred activists had been arrested. (Note: Independent media -- including the Euronews Russian-language service widely available in Minsk -- included footage of police striking demonstrators and pictures of demonstrators in custody with black eyes and other conspicuous bruises. End note.)

¶2. (C) Roughly eighty trials of imprisoned demonstrators were scheduled for March 26. Poloff attended several of the hearings at the Soviyetskiy District Court in Minsk. Human rights activist and former political prisoner Enira Bronitskaya, who was present at the courthouse, told Poloff that "Malady Front" leaders and former political prisoners Dmitriy Dashkevich and Artur Finkevich, and Mogilyov-based activist Kristina Shatikova had been beaten by police. According to Bronitskaya, Shatikova had been beaten nearly unconscious and Finkevich had marks on his face from his beating. Bronitskaya noted that it appeared to be a police strategy to arrest female demonstrators first, in an attempt to provoke their male counterparts. The independent news agency Belapan reported that trials were resulting in terms of administrative detention varying from 3 to 15 days, or in fines from BYR 525,000 (USD 244) to BYR 1.05 million (488 USD).

Media Detained as Well  
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¶3. (U) According to reports in the independent press, both foreign and Belarusian journalists were detained by police during the demonstration. Ruta Ribaciauskiene, a correspondent with Lithuanian Television and Radio (LTR) and LTR cameraman Jonas Griskonis -- both accredited by the MFA as foreign journalists -- were grabbed by riot police while filming the demonstration, had a video cassette seized and were detained by police for two hours before being released. Semyon Pechanko, a Belarusian national who reports for the independent newspaper "Nasha Niva" was arrested for allegedly participating in the unsanctioned march. He was sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention.

Milinkevich Reportedly Among the Injured  
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¶4. (U) Former presidential candidate and leader of the "For Freedom" movement Aleksandr Milinkevich was reportedly injured as well during the demonstration. In a press

statement following the march, Milinkevich told Belapan that the Lukashenko regime had shown "the face of a beast with bared teeth" in its treatment of demonstrators. According to Milinkevich, the regime had only toyed with democratic reform in the hopes it could receive money from the West.

Comment

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15. (C) Yesterday's disruption of a peaceful demonstration once again displayed the true, violent and authoritarian nature of the Lukashenko regime. Willingness to detain accredited foreign journalists and to seize their materials shows the world what the Embassy has known for some time: this criminal regime will not be bound by treaties or diplomatic protocols.  
MOORE